

**The Buddha Within Ourselves**  
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IT was in 1991 that I began to take a closer interest in the Italian movement of the Soka Gakkai, although I had known about it for some time. I had read various things about the organization and heard it spoken about by colleagues at international conferences where professors and researchers interested in religion gather periodically. However, it was only in 1991 that I began to have direct contact with the SGI and started to contemplate a research project involving the organization which, as often happens, has gone through several different phases.

For over a year, two young collaborators, Laura Ferrarotti and Enrica Tedeschi, and I attended those meetings, which are fundamental to the practice of SGI members, our status being that of "observer/participant." With the consent of leaders and members, we always recorded the dialogue at meetings so that we would not forget or distort what was said. I wanted our role, as well as our scientific interest, to be clear at all times, and I am convinced of the importance of using an ethically correct methodology for this.

Once we realized the size of the movement in Italy, we decided to use a questionnaire to supplement our qualitative study that was based on observation, interviews and the gathering of experiences. The questionnaire was carefully discussed and compiled and then sent to individual groups through internal distribution. About 4,000 completed questionnaires were returned. A representative sample was chosen and the results elaborated with a group of students: a useful formative experience for sociology students. Then research papers were prepared, based on a deeper observation of specific areas. Meanwhile, my two collaborators analyzed the movement's two magazines, *Duemilauno* and *Il nuovo rinascimento*.

All of this work was presented at a conference on Buddhism in May 1994. Yet, I still wasn't sure that I had full knowledge of the movement and its reality which, contrary to my expectations, was showing itself to be rich and complex. I had heard that critics of the Soka Gakkai considered it to be a very rigid, almost militaristic, organization. I also knew that Nichiren and his followers had been accused of violence as well as intolerance and sectarianism. I had also felt that some members perceived the role of leaders as an authoritarian one. Therefore, I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the movement, continuing to have direct contact with it and to participate in both the ordinary and special meetings.

It seemed to me that the Soka Gakkai was going through a difficult period of transition in relation to its "divorce" from the priesthood, and I wanted to understand how it was going to change. Therefore, I continued to collect experiences, visiting Florence, Milan, Turin and southern Italy to take part in various meetings. After five years of study, I believe I now understand why this movement interests and attracts many people of all ages. I think I understand why people remain in the organization and commit to participation in its many activities as well as why some don't remain. The lack of pressure to join and the freedom to leave the group seem to me

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nevertheless very important, and it is good that these two aspects coexist.

ONE of the reasons for people's attraction to this movement is its potential for transforming the negativity that is often unavoidable in life. The life stories of many of the people I spoke to, whose words and suffering I recorded, all reveal a difficult past. Those words still retain the sound of anguish: You can hear it, you can almost touch it. They recall how meeting someone who practiced, and then the Gohonzon, gave them an aim in life, gave them hope. Gradually they rediscovered their interest in life. Many members say that Nichiren's teachings, as explained in Daisaku Ikeda's guidance, as well as that of the Italian leaders, constituted a turning point for them, redirecting their desires and expectations.

Another reason for people's strong interest in ISG (Soka Gakkai Italy) is related to the concept of "useful action" in the world. It seems that many members were attracted to ISG because of this. Pain is apparently transformed into medicine. Difficulties seem to take on a different aspect when reconsidered in the light of the concept of karma. Here the law of karma is not regarded as destructive, or as an alibi for incapacity or failure. Instead, it is used to offer possible explanations, rational interpretations and direction for the future. The painful present thereby becomes a clear sign of the past and of the future: It is here and now—one is taught—that one gathers the fruit from seeds sown in the past and one sows the seeds for tomorrow.

In this light, faith, practice and study are no longer abstract words or distant aims. Instead, they become actual facts, opportunities, constant stimulus, and it is up to the individual to reap them. People may get the impression that the way of life offered as an example by the Soka Gakkai is somewhat demanding, in terms both of time and of willingness to change. It is no wonder, therefore, that not everybody feels up to it. Yet, I understand the strong bond that unites those who remain, who intend to work together for themselves and for others.

IS the organization, then, free of problems? Is everything "smooth sailing" once an individual has determined to embark on a journey of faith? I don't think so. Just as any personal commitment is demanding, commitment to the Italian SGI movement seems to have had, and to still have, problems. It seems to me that there are some difficulties in the relationship between the membership and the leaders in adapting and orienting the Italian mentality towards different cultural suggestions. The movement finds itself constantly in the struggle to achieve and maintain equilibrium—to strike a balance between the tendency to institutionalize and organize (to form groups, chapters headquarters, territories, etc.) and to foster spontaneity (to form networks and groups that are created from common interests).

For many, the Soka Gakkai has meant positive experiences, footholds, encouragement; the possibility of finding answers to the exigencies of change, and to the need for meaning. For many, it has been a prime path to happiness, a source of strength. It has inspired; it offers assurances.

It should be hoped that these aspects will, with time, take even deeper root, gain acknowledgment and opportunities to develop. This will, of course, depend on the type of recognition, on the type of welcome and encounter that Italian society and the larger European context offer with regard to the Soka Gakkai.

For myself, the encounter with this complex phenomenon has been a positive and enriching experience. □

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